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Schweizer Graphik

Curating Switzerland as a Graphic Design Nation in 1925

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Along the walls and wooden pillars of the large sky-lit exhibition hall, mobile panels formed booths onto which posters of slightly varying sizes were directly mounted.¹ Each panel accommodated one poster in an orderly sequence, with similar spacing. Part of the hall was completely taken up by a large rug with a table and chairs on it and a flower bouquet placed on top of the former, providing the exhibition space with a salon-like atmosphere. Judging from its title alone, *Schweizer Graphik 1730–1925 im Dienste von Reise und Verkehr* (Swiss printing from 1730–1925 in service of traveling and tourism), one might have expected an exhibition of printed matter for the Swiss tourism industry.² However, as the installation shots indicate, the exhibition that took place from September 25 to October 10, 1925 at the Haus des Werkbundes in Frankfurt am Main was not just limited to tourism advertisements. In fact, the

photographs show posters for cultural events, such as a typographic poster by Walter Käch for the recent exhibition *Die Schrift* at the Kunstgewerbemuseum Zürich or an artist's poster by Ferdinand Hodler advertising an exhibition of his paintings at the Kunsthalle Bern. *Schweizer Graphik 1730–1925 im Dienste von Reise und Verkehr* was curated by the Kunstgewerbemuseum Zürich, and was accompanied by an illustrated brochure. From this, we learn that the exhibition showed not only posters, but also prints made with various techniques, some of them dating back to the mid-18th century.³ Moreover, the exhibition was part of *Die schöne Schweiz* (Beautiful Switzerland), which also included another exhibition entitled *Modernes Verkehrswesen* (Modern tourism) that was put together by the Schweizerische Verkehrszentrale (Swiss Tourism Office). This section displayed an array of printed matter, photographs, and dioramas of Switzerland's tourist industry.⁴ The overall exhibition *Die schöne Schweiz* had been jointly organized by the Schweizerische Zentralstelle für das Ausstellungswesen (Swiss Central Office for Exhibitions) and the Schweizerische Verkehrszentrale, two state-financed organizations.⁵ Since its founding in 1908, the Schweizerische Zentralstelle für das Ausstellungswesen was subordinate to the Federal Department of Economic Affairs⁶ and was responsible for organizing Switzerland's presence at international trade fairs.⁷ Thus, *Schweizer Graphik 1730–1925 im Dienste von Reise und Verkehr* shows an

interesting conglomeration of different actors pursuing different interests, which in turn prompts us to question the aims of the exhibition. It also seems striking that an exhibition held abroad in 1925 should so confidently use the national label “Schweizer Graphik.” How is this to be understood? And how does it relate to today’s understanding of Swiss graphic design and typography? By focusing on these questions, the present essay will subject this largely forgotten exhibition to a close analysis. [Figs. 50, 51]

Tourism as a catalyst for poster design

The exhibition in Frankfurt had been discussed in the session of the Federal Council of July 31, 1925, indicating that it was accorded a certain importance by the federal authorities. Furthermore, the Federal Council decided that the Swiss Consul based in Frankfurt had to be present at the opening as an official representative of the Government.⁸ The minutes of the meeting record the government’s interest in the exhibition:

The exhibition’s primary purpose is to draw the attention of the very wealthy regions around Frankfurt to Switzerland. (Die Ausstellung bezweckt in erster Linie, die Aufmerksamkeit der Frankfurt umgebenden, sehr wohlhabenden Länderstrecken auf die Schweiz zu lenken.)⁹

As this quotation shows, the interest of the authorities was focused entirely on tourism. The exhibition in 1925 took place at a difficult time for tourism in Switzerland. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 was followed by an unstable economic situation in Europe over the following years, and the so-called golden age of tourism had ended.¹⁰ Economic crises led to state intervention. The government supported the tourism industry, not least through loans and a reduction in the cost of public transport. An initiative by hoteliers led to the establishment of the Nationale Vereinigung zur Förderung des Reiseverkehrs in 1917, which in 1919 was renamed Schweizerische Verkehrszentrale and was intended to give the sector a further economic boost and to bundle individual interests on a national level.¹¹ The tourism sector had been a stimulating factor for Switzerland’s printing and graphic industry, and it now benefitted from governmental support and from the establishment of a national tourism association. Tourism posters were commissioned regularly, and poster competitions were sponsored.¹²

The graphic industry in international exhibitions

However, as already noted in the introduction, the exhibits in *Schweizer Graphik 1730–1925 im Dienste von Reise und Verkehr* were not just related to tourism, as there

was a diverse selection of other posters on display. The content of these exhibits ranged from advertisements for services to cultural events, and was designed by artists who were among the most famous in these genres at the time, such as Cuno Amiet, Otto Baumberger, Augusto Giacometti, Ferdinand Hodler, Otto Morach, Walter Käch, and Ernst Keller.¹³ The exhibition thus seems to have been intended as a historical overview of Swiss graphic production up to the present day.

In September 1924, just one year before Frankfurt, a very similar selection of posters had been shown at the exhibition *Schweizer Kunst und Kunstgewerbe* at Liljevalchs Konsthall in Stockholm.¹⁴ As part of a Swedish-Swiss exchange the exhibition in Stockholm had been initiated by Alfred Altherr senior in his dual function as a key figure and founder of the Schweizerischer Werkbund (SWB) and as director of the Kunstgewerbeschule and its museum in Zurich.¹⁵ Moreover, that exhibition had been the first test of the cooperation between the Werkbund and the Schweizerische Zentralstelle für das Ausstellungswesen that had been recommended in a decree in 1919 regarding the organization of exhibitions abroad.¹⁶

Only a few months before the exhibition in Frankfurt opened, Switzerland also took part in the Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels in Paris, which lasted from April 28 to October 25, 1925 and was the first large-scale international

industrial exhibition in the tradition of earlier world fairs that had been held since the end of the war. Here, the Zentralstelle für das Ausstellungswesen was responsible for the organization of the Swiss pavilion, while numerous actors and stakeholders participated in the realization of the exhibition, including representatives of the SWB.¹⁷ The official catalog for the Swiss pavilion in Paris explicitly lists the “Arts graphiques appliqués,” meaning lithography, letterpress, and intaglio printing, as one of three industrial sectors alongside the textile industry and the watch and jewelry industries. It seems surprising that the graphic industry appears so prominently in this representative exhibition, as the other two outperformed the graphic industry by far in terms of employment numbers and export volume.¹⁸ [Figs. 52, 53]

Rooted in Swiss craft tradition

In *Schweizer Graphik 1730–1925 im Dienste von Reise und Verkehr*, the exhibited prints were understood as intrinsically connected to the tourist industry by the organizers. As the images in the brochure show, they represent typical Swiss motifs such as characteristic landscapes or a couple in traditional costume.¹⁹ One of the texts attributes the development of these prints to the demand for pictorial souvenirs on the part of tourists:

[It was] the enthusiasm for Switzerland of that time, which grew out of intellectual and cultural preconditions, that made possible the development and flourishing of Swiss craftwork in the second half of the 18th century and around the turn of the [present] century. Little Switzerland would hardly have been able to make such a stately branch of art flourish as it did at that time if there had not been an encompassing European interest in it. ([Es war] die Schweizbegeisterung jener Zeit, die aus geistig-kulturellen Vorbedingungen erwachse, eine Entwicklung und Blüte der Schweizer Kleinkunst in der zweiten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts und um die Jahrhundertwende überhaupt erst ermöglichte. Die kleine Schweiz hätte nämlich wohl kaum einen so stattlichen Kunstzweig zum Blühen bringen können, wie ihn jene Zeit präsentiert, wenn nicht ein umfassendes europäisches Interesse dafür vorhanden gewesen wäre.)²⁰

The author Jakob Rudolf Welti describes the production of these prints as a reaction to a Europe-wide interest in which they functioned as travel souvenirs, postcards, and advertising leaflets all at the same time.²¹

Today's separate genres of postcards, illustrated hotel brochures and tourism posters were all served in those days by

these black-and-white sheets and hand-colored engravings, the production of which developed from beginnings that often served purely artistic purposes, and became a flourishing tourist industry that was cleverly exploited for business as demand increased. (Den heutigen getrennten Dienst der Ansichtskarte, des illustrierten Hotelprospektes und des Verkehrsplakates verfahren zu jener Zeit alle diese Schwarz-Weissblätter und handkolorierten Stiche, deren Herstellung, aus vielfach der reinen Kunst dienenden Anfängen sich entwickelnd, mit der steigenden Nachfrage zu einem geschäftsmässig klug ausgenützten, blühenden Fremdenindustriezweig wurde.)²²

Welti talks about the so-called *vedutas*, colored etchings that appeared in the middle of the 18th century at the time when there was an increase in Alpine tourism. The imagery of the *vedutas*, geared to customers' wishes, was produced by the so-called *Kleinmeister* and their assistants using the division of labor and serial production. Owing to these pre-industrial production methods and their explicitly economic orientation, it does not seem entirely unreasonable from today's perspective to locate them close to graphic design.²³ The imagery of these engravings also played an important role in the construction of Swiss identity and its image as an Alpine nation.²⁴



Fig. 50

Fig. 50
Installation view, *Schweizer
Graphik 1730–1925 im Dienste
von Reise und Verkehr*,
Haus des Werkbundes in
Frankfurt am Main,
Sep. 25–Oct. 10, 1925.

Fig. 51
Installation view, *Schweizer
Graphik 1730–1925 im
Dienste von Reise und Verkehr*,
Haus des Werkbundes
in Frankfurt am Main,
Sep. 25–Oct. 10, 1925.

Fig. 51





Fig. 52

Fig. 52
Emile Cardinaux, "Sommer in der Schweiz," 1921, poster for the Schweizerische Verkehrszentrale, in *Schweizer Graphik 1730–1925 im Dienste von Reise und Verkehr*, Haus des Werkbunds Frankfurt a. Main, 1925, p. 23.

Fig. 53
Installation view, *Schweizer Kunst und Kunstgewerbe*, Sep. 1924, Liljevalchs Konsthall, in *Kunstgewerbemuseum Zürich (ed.), Schweizer Kunst und Kunstgewerbe von der Ausstellung in Stockholm*, Kunstgewerbemuseum Zürich, 1925, p. 5.

Fig. 54
Johann Ulrich Schellenberg, *Winterthur 1709–1795, Neftenbach Aussicht auf Töss und Kyburg*, colored engraving, in *Schweizer Graphik 1730–1925 im Dienste von Reise und Verkehr*, Haus des Werkbunds Frankfurt a. Main, 1925, p. 4.

However, by leading modern tourism advertising back to the image production of the 18th century, Welti relates the traditional craft to the technical advancements in the printing industry in the spirit of the SWB. Furthermore, he considers Swiss tourism advertising as a specifically Swiss artistic phenomenon that evolved of its own accord without any stimulation from outside.

Another text about lithographed posters and the promotion of tourism within the exhibition catalog of *Schweizer Graphik* by Alfred Altherr senior further develops what this reference to tradition means in stylistic terms:

The successes that led to the development of artistic, original lithography mainly occurred because they deliberately refrained from using photography. If it had succumbed to this danger, we would have poor artistic results in this field. (Die Erfolge, die der Entwicklung der künstlerischen Original-lithographie beschieden waren, sind in der Hauptsache dem Umstand zu verdanken, dass sie bewusst darauf verzichtet hat, sich der Photographie als Hilfsmittel zu bedienen. Wäre sie dieser Gefahr erlegen, so wären wir arm an künstlerischen Ergebnissen auf diesem Gebiete.)²⁵

In his text, Altherr attributes the international success of Swiss posters exclusively to the so-called artist poster and degrades the

new technical possibilities of photomontage and photolithography, which were emerging at the same time, to inferior “aids.” Thus, it does not come as a surprise that the exhibition did not include avantgarde experiments. [Fig. 54]

The beginning of national representation through graphic design?

A special Swiss issue of the Leipzig journal *Archiv für Buchgewerbe und Gebrauchsgraphik* from 1929 noted that the posters at the exhibition in Stockholm had attracted a lot of attention:

I will never forget the blatant amazement with which the Stockholm public looked at the poster section of the Swiss exhibition set up by Alfred Altherr in the summer of 1924. Really, it was the heyday of the Swiss poster, and even though the Scandinavians themselves had very respectable achievements to show for themselves, as became clear in Paris a year later, they gladly recognized the primacy of the Swiss poster, which at the time was undoubtedly the best in all of Europe. (Ich werde nie vergessen, mit welchem unverhohlenen Staunen das Stockholmer Publikum im Sommer 1924 auf der schweizerischen Ausstellung, die Alfred Altherr eingerichtet hatte, die Abteilung der Plakate betrachtete. Wirklich, es war

damals die Zeit der Hochblüte des schweizerischen Plakats, und obschon die Skandinaven, wie sich ein Jahr später in Paris deutlich zeigte, selber sehr respektable Leistungen aufzuweisen hatten, so anerkannten sie gerne den Vorrang des schweizerischen Plakates, welches damals fraglos das beste in ganz Europa war.)²⁶

We should bear in mind that the author of this article, Josef Gantner, was not an observer from abroad. As a former board member of the SWB and editor of the magazine *Das Werk*, he had the same interests as one of the parties involved in the organization of the exhibition.²⁷ Nevertheless, the fact that this German magazine devoted a special issue exclusively to the Swiss graphic industry shows just how much interest it generated outside Switzerland.

The involvement of the SWB in the official exhibition activities of Switzerland abroad in 1924 led to a paradigm shift in this field, and also to a kind of arranged marriage between culture and economics. Although the various actors involved naturally pursued different agendas, they must have seen mutual benefits from each other's participation.²⁸ As the exhibition in Frankfurt testifies, the graphic industry was situated right in the middle of all this. How can this be explained?

As we have seen, the posters offer a possible explanation. Given the state support for the tourism sector in the interwar period,

tourism advertising and thus the graphic industry must also have experienced a boom. When the Schweizerische Verkehrszentrale was founded in 1917, one of its tasks was to promote tourism advertisements, and so graphic design came into the focus of a state-funded organization. As Matthieu Gillabert writes, the Schweizerische Verkehrszentrale can be regarded as the first government-funded organization to have decisively spread a certain image of Switzerland abroad. At that time, this visual representation of the nation was based exclusively on economic factors.²⁹ Nevertheless, the exhibitions in Stockholm and Frankfurt show that the selection of the imagery cannot be traced back to the Schweizerische Verkehrszentrale alone, but must rather have been made through the intentions of all the actors involved.

The posters themselves actually seem to have been the common denominator of the economic and cultural actors involved. By depicting the cultural life of the country, they also advertised Switzerland as an attractive tourist destination. They show picturesque tourist destinations, and at the same time advertise the skills of Swiss artists. Whatever the motive, they are also proof of the skill and technical progress of the country's printing industry.

Already in 1924 and 1925 there seems to have been a certain consensus about what kind of images should be shown under the label "Swiss." In all three exhibitions mentioned here, the list of poster artists was

roughly the same, including Cuno Amiet, Otto Baumberger, Emile Cardinaux, Augusto Giacometti, and Ferdinand Hodler. The representatives of the SWB who were probably responsible for the selection of the works thereby also demonstrate a certain understanding of art. As Alfred Altherr senior stated in the Frankfurt exhibition brochure, the lithographic poster was better off without “succumbing” to avant-garde art and design tendencies.³⁰ Interestingly, it was the figurative painting of these same artists that in the 1940s would be made into a specifically national, Swiss branch of painting, while the avant-garde was denied the label “Swiss.”³¹

However, Gantner’s article from 1929 also shows that Altherr’s approach had not met with the approval of everyone on the design scene.

He criticizes the genealogy of Swiss tourism advertising that was propagated in Frankfurt, which supposedly derived from the *vedutas*.³³ In his opinion, however, it is precisely this “chumming up” to tourism that made Swiss advertising fall behind the developments that took place in the major German cities.

Switzerland does everything it can to attract the foreigner, but for the most part it does so in a completely outdated way, and herein lies the point where Swiss tourism advertising could learn from the advertising of German cities [...]. (Die Schweiz tut alles, den Fremden anzulocken, aber sie tut es zum grössten Teil in einer völlig veralteten Weise, und hier liegt der Punkt, wo die schweizerische Verkehrsreklame von der Reklame der deutschen Grossstädte lernen könnte [...].)³²

- 1 *Schweizer Graphik* 1925: 26.
- 2 The term “Graphik” or “Grafik” is highly ambiguous and can designate any output from the printing industry as posters, engravings, books, or smaller printed matter for advertising purposes. By analyzing the exhibition from 1925, the present text also aims to discuss this ambiguity.
- 3 *Schweizer Graphik* 1925: 6–8.
- 4 The annual report of the Schweizerische Verkehrszentrale lists its exhibits as photographs, dioramas, leaflets, and posters. See Nationale Vereinigung zur Förderung des Reiseverkehrs 1925: 12.
- 5 Zehnder 2016: n.p.
- 6 Today: The Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research (EAER).
- 7 In 1927 it would be merged with other Swiss trade organizations to form the Schweizerische Zentrale für Handelsförderung (OSEC). See Münch 1997: 98; Gillabert 2013: 163 (see especially footnote 522).
- 8 Swiss Federal Archive SFA, E81#1000/1134#242*, “Schweizer Graphik 1730–1925 im Dienste von Reise und Verkehr,” in Frankfurt/Main 1925, 20.07.1925–31.07.1925, Auszug aus dem Protokoll der Sitzung des Schweizerischen Bundesrates 31.07.1925.
- 9 Swiss Federal Archive SFA, E81#1000/1134#242*, “Schweizer Graphik 1730–1925 im Dienste von Reise und Verkehr,” in Frankfurt/Main 1925, 20.07.1925–31.07.1925, Auszug aus dem Protokoll der Sitzung des Schweizerischen Bundesrates 31.07.1925.
- 10 Tissot 2014: n.p.
- 11 Nowadays Schweiz Tourismus. See Tissot 2014: n.p.; Richter 2014c: 43.
- 12 Richter 2014c: 43.
- 13 See, for example, Margadant 1983: 23–27.
- 14 Swiss arts and crafts; it showed paintings, sculptures, ceramics, stained-glass painting, metalwork, textiles, books, prints, and posters. Kunstgewerbemuseum Zürich 1924: 11–28.
- 15 In 1922, an exhibition of Swedish applied arts had already been held in Zurich as part of this exchange. See Kunstgewerbemuseum Zürich 1925: 2. The SWB was founded on the initiative of Alfred Altherr senior, who returned to Switzerland in 1912 as a member of the Deutscher Werkbund (DWB) and with teaching experience from Germany. After his return, he became director of the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich. Until the 1930s he was an important member of the SWB board, where he held various offices. See Zumstein 2013b: 419.
- 16 Münch 1997: 98.
- 17 However, the short-term organization and large-scale participation led to conflicts of interest. See Münch 1997: 98; Wohlwend Piai 2013b: 119; Debluë 2015: 229–231.
- 18 Tschudin 2019: n.p.
- 19 *Schweizer Graphik* 1925: 4, 9, 13, 17.
- 20 Welte 1925: 9.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Nyffenegger 2016: 139–141.
- 24 See, for example, Marchal 1992: 37–49.
- 25 Altherr 1925: 19.
- 26 Gantner 1929: 6.
- 27 The art historian Joseph Gantner had been an editor for *Das Werk* from 1923 to 1927. See Caviezel-Rüegg 2005: n.p. In 1923 he also became secretary (*Schriftführer*) and in 1925 director (*Geschäftsführer*) of the SWB. See Gnägi, Nicolai & Wohlwend Piai 2013: 418.
- 28 Münch 1997: 98.
- 29 Gillabert 2013: 162–163.
- 30 Altherr 1925: 19.
- 31 Kadelbach 2010: 128–129.
- 32 Gantner 1929: 8.
- 33 Gantner 1929: 8–9.